

Personal View

In the weeks up to my 65th birthday and retirement people kept asking what I would do. Soon it became almost a threat and I longed to retort that I would do absolutely nothing. In the event I decided to travel in India for I had not been beyond Bombay and my wife was born in Rajputana.

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We made for Kashmir. One of the newly elected fellows of our College of Physicians lived in Srinagar and I decided to call on him and offer my congratulations. He was a physician of distinction and both his daughters were going into medicine. I told him that we proposed to journey into the Himalayas and reach Ley. At once his clinical eyes focused on me and I was told to obtain frusemide tablets for I was likely to develop pulmonary oedema. Moreover, since it was the end of September, the snow might come any day and the road would remain blocked until June. Such advice from a consultant was not encouraging and clearly he had formed a poor impression of my circulation. But we were determined to get up on to the Tibetan plateau and so we took the bus from Srinagar to Ley, a distance of 265 miles. The journey took two days with an overnight stop. Above the windscreen was painted "Trust in God." This was very necessary for it was unusual to be motoring at 15 000 feet and looking straight down 3000 feet to the valley below. Certainly it was the bus ride of a lifetime.

At Ley I met the one surgeon in Ladakh. Though the commonest complaint is peptic ulcer he had never seen a case of prostatic hypertrophy, a condition from which Mongoloid people are immune. At 11 000 feet Ley is the most remote part of India and since the huge mountains bar the approach of any clouds the rainfall is the same as in the Sahara and the terrain looks like the surface of the moon. I shall remember the intense brightness of the sun by day and having to use hot water bottles in our sleeping bags at night.

We did some trekking. I found this to be an equal challenge whether on foot or on a pony but I soon realised that with four legs the pony was more surefooted.

After the mountains we changed to the flat and went by boat from Srinagar to the Wular Lake. It was a contrast to float down stream on the River Jhelum for 30 miles. The vale of Kashmir is lovely, crowded with bul buls and kingfishers, while over head kites twist and whistle. All around hashish grew in plenty and so naturally camouflaged within the rice fields.

We had arranged to visit the Fifth Cavalry in which my father-in-law had served as a regular officer. Raised in 1841 it remains a prestigious regiment as was confirmed by the elegance of the mess. Since my wife was born into the regiment over half a century ago we were prehistoric to the youthful officers. Then her father had paraded on horseback wearing a golden puggree head-dress and polo was the order of every day. Now they ride in tanks wearing more practical uniforms called "olive greens," and except for the president's guard there are no horses in the Indian army. If we had shut our eyes and listened to the chat in the mess, their expressions and laughter, it could have come from a tape-recording of Sandhurst on a Friday night. They provided the acme of hospitality and good manners.

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To complete our military pilgrimage we went to Mount Abu to see my wife's birthplace. Mount Abu is a hill station in

Rajasthan and has a fine climate to which the administration used to move in summer. We found the maternity pavillion easily for overlooking the road was a huge notice—"Delay the first, space the second, and stop the third." I accepted that in the 1920s such advice would have been incomprehensible to a cavalry officer. It remains so to the Indian people whose population ends each year with a net gain of 14 million. By chance the Association of Surgeons of India was meeting at the hospital. With their natty dark suitings and demonstrative hands they were just like surgeons and quite unlike their fellow countrymen. The subject was calculus formation, the curse of their territory, which first appears in their children at the age of three.

In Bombay we spent a night in a five-star hotel. This was not our normal habitat and as we ascended to floor 16 we left behind India's noise and climate for an airconditioned apartment in which we could enjoy using hot water. We were embarrassed by the concentration of dirt that ran out of our hair. Next morning we returned spotless into the heat and human turbulence that is essentially India.

After 10 weeks on the move the one thing we required was a good holiday and so we continued south to Goa. The long beaches, the palm trees, and the Arabian sea provide the paradise that so many young Europeans have discovered. They arrive mostly in pairs and live cheaply in cottages on the sand dunes. Here they pass three to six months of bliss and they look lovely on the beach absolutely suntanned and naked. It is difficult to imagine how they reintegrate on their return to Europe but for anyone wanting to enjoy unemployment I recommend Goa, dominated as it is by the warmth and love that comes from the sun. I was the only old-age pensioner in sight and they came to know us as Mama and Papa.

It took five days to retrace our steps to Delhi which, like BMA headquarters, was largely designed by Lutyens. We had completed our trail from little Tibet in the north and southward as far as the Goan beaches. Though we had travelled by air, sea, river, pony, bus, and motor bicycle the most exciting was being pulled by an Indian-built (4-6-2) steam engine that went like a racehorse puffing away at the inclines and smelling so much sweeter than a whiff of diesel. Finally, we climbed into a jumbo—we flew out of Delhi at 4 30 am and had lunch in London later that morning. We had returned to the north world and its gin and tonic with or without ice and a slice of lemon and we had left a country where there is one doctor for every 100 000 people. Such a ratio would entitle Edinburgh to the services of five doctors, yet over one and a half thousand medics reside here. 1948 saw the end of the Raj and the beginning of the National Health Service and the logistics of India and Britain remain very different.

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During the flight I counted from my diary that I had spent 79 consecutive nights with my wife, a record that I had never achieved during my working life, and I now realise how fortunate I have been to retain my wonderful supporter all these years.

On my return home I passed the first week taking one anti-malarial tablet each day. Now that task is completed and once again I shall be asked what I will do.

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